DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 202 994 CE 028 571

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TITLE Adult Learning Potential: A Matter of the Mind.
INSTITUTION American Univ., Washington, D.C. Dept. of Education.
PUB DATE 12 Jan 81
NOTE 26p.

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC02 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Adult Learning; Adults; *Cognitive Processes; *Learning Processes; Learning Theories; *Lifelong Learning; *Self Actualization
IDENTIFIERS *Stress (Biological)

ABSTRACT

Adult learning potential refers to our total learning capacities. It includes cognitive and affective learning as well as intuitive and reflective learning. It does not refer just to formal education (which accounts for only a small portion of our learning), but rather all learning for living, especially learning how we manage our lives. Adult learning potential is influenced by three factors: the influence of stress, the power of the mind, and self-imposed limitations. If we are going to make greater use of and develop further our adult learning potential, we will need to (1) become more creative in approaching the life events we experience; (2) be more risk-taking in exploring new and possible means for managing our lives; (3) look beyond traditional limits and self-imposed parameters by expanding our experience base with untried but not unreasonable options; (4) explore the unknown and find out just how many choices there really are; (5) develop options by anticipating the range of alternative outcomes; (6) make the negative positive by changing perceptions and modifying our behavior accordingly; and (7) direct ourselves to where we wish to go. (A summary of 15 models of stress, by various authors, with major theories compared and contrasted, is included in this paper.) (KC)

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ED202994

Adult Learning Potential: A Matter of the Mind

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January 12, 1981

OE 028 571

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION

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Adult Learning Potential: A Matter of the Mind

Those of us involved in the education of adults frequently forget that we, too, are adult learners. This essay is intended to stimulate our thinking regarding our adult learning capacities by presenting a new perspective of our adult learning potential that highlights the intrinsic nature of human learning.

As discussed here, adult learning potential refers to our total learning capacities. It includes cognitive and affective learning, intuitive and reflective learning--all our learning functions, even those we are not really aware of. Not just in the formal education sense (which accounts for only a small portion of our learning), but rather in the grand scheme of our learning for living, especially concerning how we manage our lives. Every one of us is a learner throughout our entire life span. Each life event we experience is a learning lesson. And as we respond, we develop patterns of response based on what seems to work for us, that we use over and over again. Indeed, our lives are living-learning laboratories. To get a better understanding of that special laboratory, three aspects of our adult learning potential are explored: (1) the influence of stress, (2) the power of the mind, and (3) self-imposed limitations.

Bernice Neugarten and John McLeish, experts on adulthood, provide us with provocative insights into our adult learning potential.[1,2] Their revelations include the following.

-We are smartest from 18 to 25 years of age, but are wiser and more experienced with increasing age.

-At age 45, our vocabulary is three times greater than when we graduated from college.

-At age 60, our brain possesses almost four times as much information as when we were 21.

-We have the best physical sense of ourselves from ages 15 to 24.

-Most of us weigh the most we ever do in our lives between the ages of 35 and 59.

-We have the best professional sense of ourselves from ages 40 to 49.

-Pessimism in us peaks between the ages of 30 and 39.

-After age 30, we become more realistic about achieving happiness; we realize that talent and determination are not enough to guarantee success, and that happiness is no longer a goal in itself, but encompasses our health, professional achievement, and emotional goals.

-Regardless of age, bright people solve problems better than dull people.

-Young adults do not appear to solve problems any better than older adults

-Activity level is one characteristic that stays most stable over the life span--quick and speedy, rapid-tempo children, generally become quick and speedy 40 and 50 year olds.

-During middle age, our mental life centers on taking stock, increased introspection, and restructuring based on life experiences. Those preliminary insights help us recognize that, not only does the mode of learning continue to evolve as we mature, but it also remains the critical core of our progression through the life span.

The Influence of Stress

One factor which dramatically influences our learning functions

is stress, which effects our emotional, social, and physiological self. A popular subject, we are being inundated with all sorts of information about stress and how to manage it. Current approaches to stress tend to focus on its negative aspects, even though it also has constructive qualities that tend to be ignored. How to capitolize on the stress we experience daily is important in our capacity as adult learners. To begin doing so, four facts about stress need to be acknowledged. First, in today's world, there is no such thing as stress-free living. Second, stress is constant and it is complex. Third, it is a dynamic, motivating force. And fourth, it is a major contributor to learning. In examining how stress influences our learning capacities, an underlying concern is determining to what extent it adds to or takes away from our sense of personal worth and satisfaction with life. In that regard, the question arises: Can we, as adults, learn and be taught how to assume greater responsibility for the directions our lives take, and handle the stress we face in a manner compatible with our sense of self--physical, sexual, emotional, and social--as we progress through the life span? A number of experts on stress believe we can.

While research efforts have concentrated on the effects of stress on our physiology, Hans Selye, the "father of stress," has presented a broader interpretation which addresses both health and self-fulfillment.[3] Central to his view is the notion of "adaptation energy" that allows our body and mind to respond to stress and cope with it. The significance of Selye's view is based on his notion of "eustress"--good stress--which presupposes that we have some choice in effectively channeling our stress and managing it without excessive duress. According to Selye, "stress

is the spice of life," and "life without stress is death."

Frederic Flach, author of Choices: Coping Creatively with Personal Change, bases his view of stress on a person's strong urge to maintain and restore equilibrium when experiencing stress.[4] It concentrates on those stressful experiences which demand restoring our balance, and require us to emerge changed in some way. Flach contends that successfully eliminating a cycle of ineffective, self-defeating behaviors is spurred by the demand to create new and alternative ways for dealing with stress. In his work Stress Power!, physician Robert Anderson points out that tension is bad only when there is too much or too little.[5] Adaptation is a major dimension of his approach to stress. He identifies eight ways for handling stress and facilitating adaptation. Sociologist Robert Scott and anthropologist Alan Howard developed a mastery model of stress that involves five conditions needed for successful problem solving.[6] According to them, once mastery takes place, the person's ability to manage stress is superior to his or her ability before the problem surfaced. That is, if the same problem arises again, the individual is better able to handle it effectively.

So far, the most signficant research showing a causal relationship between stressful life events and illness has been conducted by Thomas Holmes and Richard Rahe.[7] They developed the Social Readjustment Rating Scale (SRRS), which ranks forty-three life events according to the severity of their impact on the person by registering life change units (LCUs) on a scale of 0 to 100. Numerous studies using the SRRS have been conducted across cultural and ethnic lines. Most significantly, results have indicated that the accumulation of crucial life events by an indi-

vidual is related to the severity of ensuing illness. When LCU totals reached over 300, almost 80% of the subjects in that range became very ill during the following year; 50-70% of those sampled who were in the high risk category were subsequently hurt in accidents.

To get an overview of existing approaches to stress, I examined fourteen models which have evolved since World War II. Briefly, the analysis revealed: (1) The definition of stress varies from one model to another; there is no explicit definition of stress. (2) Most models concentrate on the impact of adverse, traumatic life events on the individual. (3) Most models focus on the physiological impact of stress. (4) No model takes into account all levels of human functioning. (5) The impact of stress on the learning process is addressed in only a cursory manner, if at all. (6) Critical factors that influence the nature of responses to stress have been ignored. A synopsis of the models of stress surveyed is presented in the chart.*

Stress research is a fairly recent phenomena, having come to fore only since the 1920s, but not beginning to burgeon until after World War II. Most research on stress has been prompted by its physiological effects on the human being, and has been conducted by physicians, who until the 1970s concentrated almost solely on the adverse effects of stress. That concentration is changing as the acknowledgement that stress emanates from the mind rather than the body gains increasing attention. This new thrust is revealed in the work of physician, Kenneth Pelletier. He has written Mind as Healer, Mind as Slayer, one of the

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*See attached.

most insightful works on stress, psychosomatic illness (such as arthritis, cancer, and heart disease), and stress prevention.[8] The power of the mind and the extent of our learning potential are revealed through his exposition on the principles of holistic medicine in which we are encouraged to assume responsibility for our own well-being because we are the best qualified to do so.

The Power of the Mind

Unfortunately, we know very little about the power of the mind. In a recent National Geographic television special, "The Mysteries of the Mind," it was pointed out that even though the brain is the most powerful force on earth, it lacks the power to understand itself.[9] According to Richard Restak, author of The Brain: The Last Frontier, the human being is the only known living animal whose brain is developed way beyond where he is.[10] Barbara Brown, biofeedback expert and author of Supermind, notes that while "...science does know something about the necessary conditions for thought that can analyze and synthesize,...We understand nothing of the operations of mind that lead to the human qualities of loyalty, of love, of identity, of power, or pleasure or understanding."[11] She states

> ...The ultimate activity of thought--the faculty for introspection, for self-awareness, for self-analysis, and for analyzing one's own thought processes--is still a mysterious 'black box' of mind miracles that no man seems to dare to open.[12]

In How the Brain Works, author Leslie Hart expounds upon the individual uniqueness of each human brain and its intensely aggressive nature.[13] Where learning is concerned, Hart discards the over-simplistic behaviorist stimulus-response theories. He tells us

> ...We know beyond question that the brain is elaborately 'gated.'...it will admit only those inputs it decides to admit, and each brain possesses what it does admit in its own individual way...The processing depends...greatly on the total, previous stored experience in that particular brain.[14]

Bob Samples, author of The Metaphoric Mind contends that we favor the rational, analytic left half of our brain, and have lost touch with the right half which governs our intuition, our emotions, and our creative consciousness.[15] He blames the left-hemisphere dominance of our culture with its language and linear-sequential ordering of time for suppressing the holistic and cyclical thoughts and perceptions of the metaphoric mind. Samples asserts, "Humans have created cultures that sytematically deny the fulfillment of the individual. Cultures were born, matured, and died in an awesome parade of variations on the human theme...and no culture systematically nurtured all the qualities of human potential."[16]

Even though the human mind remains a mystery, it is the core of our learning abilities and potential. In their interpretation of how the mind handles stress, Walter McQuade and Ann Aikman, co-authors of Stress, support medical researcher Franz Alexander who states, "the fact that the mind rules the body is, in spite of its neglect by biology and medicine, the most fundamental fact we know about the process of life."[17]

While we have a basic understanding of the brain's structure, we do not know how it works. Research on hemispheric asymmetry--right brain-left brain operations--is still in its infancy. Nonetheless, it already has provided us with a wealth of information on some of the brain's specialized functions.[18] For example

-Right-handed men exhibit the greatest degree of lateral specialization (reliance on one side of the brain).

-Women in general and left-handed individuals of both sexes appear to have more diffuse specialization. Women, generally, demonstrate more bisymmetrical distribution of function (reliance on both sides of the brain).

-Hemispheric specialization evolves from infancy to adulthood.

-Memory seems to be located asymmetrically--it is affected when certain areas of the left-hemisphere are stimulated, but not at all when corresponding areas of the right brain are stimulated.

-These distinctions are not rigid and dualistic. It appears that the functions of both hemispheres are highly integrated, however there is a division of functions between them, with some overlap.

-This division of functions is dependent upon the variables of age, sex, handedness, culture, and to some degree, a person's occupational or professional training.

-Since it appears that the two hemispheres process information differently, it is entirely possible that separate channels of information may frequently conflict, creating the basis for anxiety and stress. One word of caution, recent research confirms that the compartmentalization of brain functions into left and right hemispheres is premature.

Self-imposed Limitations

While we continue to make progress in understanding the operations of the brain, self-imposed limitations interfere with our ability to comprehend the functions of the mind by inhibiting the development of our learning potential. Self-imposed limitations are the mental barriers

we build to protect ourselves from what what we do not know or understand. They are expressed through the attitudes, values, beliefs, and behaviors we assume and hang onto in an effort to maintain the comfort of the known and familiar status quo. A self-imposed limitation is a direct response to our resistance to change that we fear or are anxious about.

In Anatomy of an Illness as Perceived By the Patient, Norman Cousins relates how he recovered from a crippling illness, that had been diagnosed as irreversible, through the power of his mind.[19] Referring to his experience, he notes, "I have learned never to underestimate the capacity of the human mind and body to regenerate."[20] He reflects on the unfortunate tendancy of us human beings to live within our self-imposed limitations. According to Cousins

> There is far less knowledge about the fact that about 90% of pain is self-limiting, that it is not always an indication of poor health, and that, most frequently it is the result of tension, stress, worry, idleness, boredom, frustration, suppressed rage, insufficient sleep, overeating, poorly balanced diet, smoking, excessive abuses encountered by the human body in modern society. The most ignored fact of all is to eliminate the abuse.[21]

Norman Cousins provides a living example of the power of the mind to alter what seems unalterable. Through his experience, we are provided with a view of the intricacies of our self-imposed limitations and our ability to overcome them.

A possible explanation of how we allow ourselves to become victimized by our self-imposed limitations is provided by philosopher Rene Dubos. In his work, Mirage of Health, he examines the biological and social adaptation that we undergo throughout our life time, which he

interprets as being both a struggle and a partnership.[22] Dubos points out that our desire for change sets us apart from other living things by leading us to a life of adventure, and away from the environment to which we are biologically adapted. He explains

> While it may be comforting to imagine a life free of stresses and strains in a carefree world, this will remain an idle dream. Man cannot hope to find another paradise on earth, because paradise is a static concept while human life is a dynamic process...the earth is not a resting place. Man has elected to fight, not necessarily for himself, but for a process of emotional, intellectual, and ethical growth that goes on forever. To grow in the midst of dangers is the fate of the human race, because it is the law of the spirit [that is the human mind].[23]

In an effort to avoid the struggle Dubos refers to, we succumb to our self-imposed limitations. It is self-imposed limitations that interfere most with using our learning potential. To function effectively, we must be able to put into proper perspective and overcome our self-imposed limitations that hinder attaining the life satisfaction we seek.

Unlearning is one means for mastering our self-imposed limitations. The function of unlearning does not mean that we erase what has been learned, but rather that we undo and redirect obsolete patterns of response which are no longer useful or that pose an obstacle to new and useful learning. Unlearning is crucial to problem solving and is essential for changing established, but ineffective learning patterns that no longer encourage personal growth. To unlearn what is necessary, we need to look closely at our performance and what will stimulate the desire for change.

A Strategy for Handling Stress

As greater understanding of the influence of stress on our lives

is pursued, we might consider four dynamics of creative change, based on the developmental tasks of adulthood identified by Robert Peck, which focus on changing values.[24] (1) We must learn to value wisdom over physical prowess. As part of the aging process, we must come to accept the inevitable loss of physical strength and attractiveness, and learn to use our life experiences. (2) We must learn to value socialization over sexualization. As we redefine people who are already in our lives and the new ones who enter, we must focus on human relationships based on social interactions rather than sexual encounters. (3) We must learn to value changing for the future over lingering on the past. As old roles, people, and activities lose their potential for satisfaction, we must demonstrate the capacity to shift our emotional investments to new ones. (4) We must learn to value flexibility over rigidity. By using our personal experience as a provisional guideline, we must maintain mental flexibility and replace our tendancy to rely on experience as fixed and automatic justification for rules of thought and behavior.

If we are going to make greater use of and develop further our adult learning potential, we will need to

1. Become more creative in approaching the life events we experience

2. Be more risk taking in exploring new and possible means for managing our lives

3. Look beyond traditional limits and self-imposed parameters by expanding our experience base with untried, but not unreasonable options

4. Explore the unknown and find out just how many choices there

really are

5. Develop options by anticipating the range of alternative outcomes

6. Make the negative positive by changing perceptions and modifying our behavior accordingly, and

7. Most of all, direct ourselves to where we wish to go.

In conclusion...

Between the Voyager views of Saturn and Jupiter, and Carl Sagan's television series, "Cosmos," it might appear that we know enough about humankind, at least enough to look beyond where we are. And yet the essence of the universe and infinity lies not in our sense of cosmic space, but in the power of our minds to comprehend it. Just imagine, with all we know about the human mind, we only understand approximately 10% of how it operates. The remaining 90%, which includes most of our learning operations--the core of our learning potential--is a mystery. We may well ask: What is that 90% about?

Finally, in the words of Marilyn Ferguson, author of The Aquarian Conspiracy,

> We are in the early morning of understanding our place in the universe and our spectacular latent powers, the flexibility and transcendence of which we are capable. The scientific breakthroughs are throwing out the challenge: If our memories are as absorbant as research has demonstrated, our awareness as wide, our brains and bodies as sensitive; if we can will changes in our physiology at the level of a single cell; if we are heirs to such evolutionary virtuosity--How can we be performing and learning at such mediocre levels? If we're so rich, why aren't we smart?[25]

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MODELS OF STRESS

DEVELOPED BY	MODEL	DEFINITION OF STRESS	KEY CONCEPTS	MAJOR PREMISE
D. Mechanic[a]	Adaptation Model	the discomforting responses of persons in particular situations	.adaptation .reversibility .defense	The amount of stress determines the social and social-psychological level of functioning in the organism.
H. Basowitz H. Persky S.J. Karchin[b] R.R. Grinker	Anxiety Model	a quality of a situation that is independent of the reaction of the individual to it	.anxiety .stress .stress situation	Through anxiety and stress, to interpret responses of groups of persons who are simultaneously subjected to conditions of extreme duress.
.F. Alexander[c] .H.F. Dunbar[d] .R.R. Grinker and J.P. Spiegel[e]	Psychosomatic Model	an attribute of stimuli	.anxiety .conflict .fear	Tension and strain that occur in one system of the body often have pathological consequences on other body systems.
H.G. Wolff[f]	Protective Reaction Pattern Model	a quality of the stimulus, as well as the individual's response to it	.protective reaction pattern	When the body is confronted with insults to its physical integrity, a complex reaction occurs aimed at sealing off and then ridding the body of its threat.

MODELS OF STRESS

DEVELOPED BY	MODEL	DEFINITION OF STRESS	KEY CONCEPTS	MAJOR PREMISE
H.Selye[g]	Biochemical Model	a state manifested by a specific syndrome consisting of all non-specifically induced changes within a biological system	.eustress .distress .stressor .stress reaction .general adaptation syndrome	An analysis of stress at the physiological and biochemical levels of human functioning.
W.J. Grace J.G. Depecs M. Robin E. Lindemann S.G. Margolin H.S. Ripley I.P. Stevenson C.H. Duncan[h]	Mechanical Model	the internal response of an organism to an external load placed upon it by some pathogenic agent, stressor, or life crisis	.stimuli .pathogenic agent .stressor .life crisis	Because of its nature, stress produces distinct pathological changes and certain typical disorders of adaptation.
B.P. Dohrenwend[i]	Modified Biochemical Model	a state intervening between antecedent constraints and consequent effort to reduce constraints	.inner constraint .external constraint .stress reaction	Stress is the product of any behavior in response to pressure, regardless of whether the behavior is adaptive or or maladaptive.
I.L. Janis[j]	Psychological Response to Traumatic Events Model	a quality of any situation that is independent of the reaction of individuals to large scale disasters	.the disaster situation .psychological responses of individuals to disaster .intrapsychic and situational determinants	Emphasis on reaction to traumatic events that encompasses three phases -- the threat phase, the danger impact phase, and the postimpact victimization phase.

MODELS OF STRESS

DEVELOPED BY	MODEL	DEFINITION OF STRESS	KEY CONCEPTS	MAJOR PREMISE
R. Scott and A. Howard[k]	Mastery Model	a stimulus or condition that produces demands on the human organism that require it to exceed its ordinary level of functioning or restrict activity levels below usual levels of functioning	Mastery depends on .an adequate energy source .appropriate resources .the nature of the problem itself .the organism's "set" when the problem arises .how the organism responds to threat	An analysis of human functioning in problem solving terms--each human being tends to develop a characteristic level of activity and stimulation at which it functions most comfortably.
T.H. Holmes and R.H. Rahe[l]	Stress of Life Events Model	the adaptive response to the occurrence of a life event	.life event .life change .adaptive response	Relates psychological and sociolcultural stresses to the orset of disease based on the theme that the occurrence of a life event evokes some adaptive or coping behavior by the individual.
M. Friedman and R.H. Rosenman[m]	Type A Behavior Pattern Model	Type A behavior pattern--an action/emotion complex characterized by being aggressively involved in a chronic, incessant struggle to achieve more and more in less and less time	.Type A behavior pattern .Type B behavior pattern .reengineering	In the absence of Type A behavior, coronary heart disease, almost never occurs before age 70; when the behavior is present, heart disease can erupt in one's 30's or 40's.
R.A. Anderson[n]	Adaptability Model	any stimulus, real or imagined, which requires an individual to be or to do anything different from the way he is or the way he behaves at any given moment	.stress .tension .distress .functional model of man .adaptability	A workable model for understanding how human beings function using practical methods for handling tension..

MODELS OF STRESS

DEVELOPED BY	MODEL	DEFINITION OF STRESS	KEY CONCEPTS	MAJOR PREMISE
A.A. McLean[O]	Ever-Changing Circles of Occupational Stress Model	a process or system that includes not only the stressful event and the reaction to it, but all the intervening steps in between	.context .vulnerability .stressors .symptoms	A dynamic schemata for interpreting the complex interaction that exists between one's ever-changing vulnerability and pressures on the job, through a simple matrix of overlapping circles representing stressors, vulnerability, context, and symptoms.
T.S. Longner and S.T. Michael[P]	Social Psyciatric Model	the pathogenic (noxious or potentially noxious) factors in the individual's social environment	.stress .strain .reaction .dynamic equilibrium	A model that focuses on the problems of adjustment of all persons in society to obtain a better understanding of how people adapt and what forces tend to damage or enhance their adaptive capacities.
B.B. Brown[Q]	Biofeedback Model of Social Stress	intellectual activity gone astray because it lacks information to solve the problems it perceives social stress - an unfavorable perception of the social environment and its dynamics	.social stress .stress reaction .worry syndrome (7 steps) .coping .biofeedback	The failure of intellectual activity to be productive is solely because the intellectual mechanisms lack the right information to produce answers that can effectively relieve the problem and the stress the intellect creates due to its inability to produce effective answers.

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